

Montgomery council approves \$70 million in budget cuts

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After weeks of debate, the Montgomery County Council squeezed in a meeting Tuesday between snowstorms and approved \$70 million in budget savings. But even after all the agonizing and cuts to libraries, road maintenance and fire and rescue services, the council essentially ended up where it had started.

The current-year budget cuts, [proposed last month by County Executive Isiah Leggett \(D\)](#), were designed to get a jump on a shortfall next fiscal year that officials have estimated could reach \$608 million.

But during the council's session Tuesday, Montgomery budget director Joe Beach said that a drop-off in state and federal revenue and in speed-camera proceeds, plus a rising tally of snow-removal costs, could push the shortfall to \$690 million.

That projection emerged during -- and was largely overshadowed by -- an impassioned debate over whether to make reductions in the county's Ride On bus service that would save several hundred thousand dollars.

Council members voted 7 to 2 against cuts to the bus service, but not before a protracted debate about the group's priorities and values in tough budget times.

The council agreed to the bulk of Leggett's suggestions, making cuts in health programs and eliminating several vacant and filled positions. But it also balked at planned cuts in a health program for the county's poor and uninsured, and the Department of Health and Human Services agreed to find \$183,000 worth of cuts elsewhere in its budget.

The council also replaced a proposed cut to ballfield maintenance with a plan to shut down various community centers in county parks.

Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) proposed dropping the Ride On cuts, saying that he wanted to send a signal that the county is not making a "retreat on transit." "I believe it is a core government service," he said, adding that he did not want to shrink the number of bus lines. "If we approve these cuts today, they are gone."

Council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring) also opposed the proposal, saying that she could not envision trying to balance the county's budget "on the backs of people without other options."

"If you take away people's options for getting to and from work, it sends a bad message to the community. I'm not going to support any cuts to Ride On," Ervin said. "I'm not

going to do it today. I'm not going to do it in March, I'm not going to do it in April," she said, referring to when the council will consider next year's budget.

But revising one of his well-worn catch phrases -- "Hard times require hard choices"-- council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) said the council needed to face reality. "Harder times require even harder choices. We need to start making them," he said.

"We're going to have an impact on people that people do not like this year, and it's going to be in every department," Andrews said. He also said the bus lines that had been chosen for elimination or reduction were among the least-used in the system.

Beach also seemed to plead with the council not to back away from the \$515,000 cut in bus service. Council members said they had found enough money to cover those costs elsewhere, including \$415,000 in an account funded by cable TV operations in Montgomery.

"We're going to need every resource possible to provide a balanced budget. If we use that money now to restore the bus service, it's not going to be available," Beach said. He said he had been counting on tapping the cable TV funds to help with next year's budget problem.

But his argument didn't have any immediate sway.

Given a shortfall in the hundreds of millions of dollars, "it's hard to believe . . . \$400,000 can add much to your headache," said council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large). When Beach said it would add "quite a bit," Elrich said, "We'll get you some Advil for that."

Elrich sought to deflect the sense that the council was evading its responsibilities for fiscal stewardship. He said that in the \$70 million in savings the council made, his colleagues had been willing to see pet projects thrown "under the bus. "To say the council is not willing to make difficult choices is unfair," he said.

Some officials said the projected shortfall could be somewhat overstating what they acknowledge is a vast problem. It assumes, for instance, more than \$150 million in wage and cost-of-living increases for county staff members and other spending that is subject to debate.

Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), who opposed the majority's action on buses, said that the council is ready to discuss the bigger cuts to come.

"I wouldn't use this as an indication of what we will do with the full budget," she said. "It just means our job beginning next month will be all that much harder."